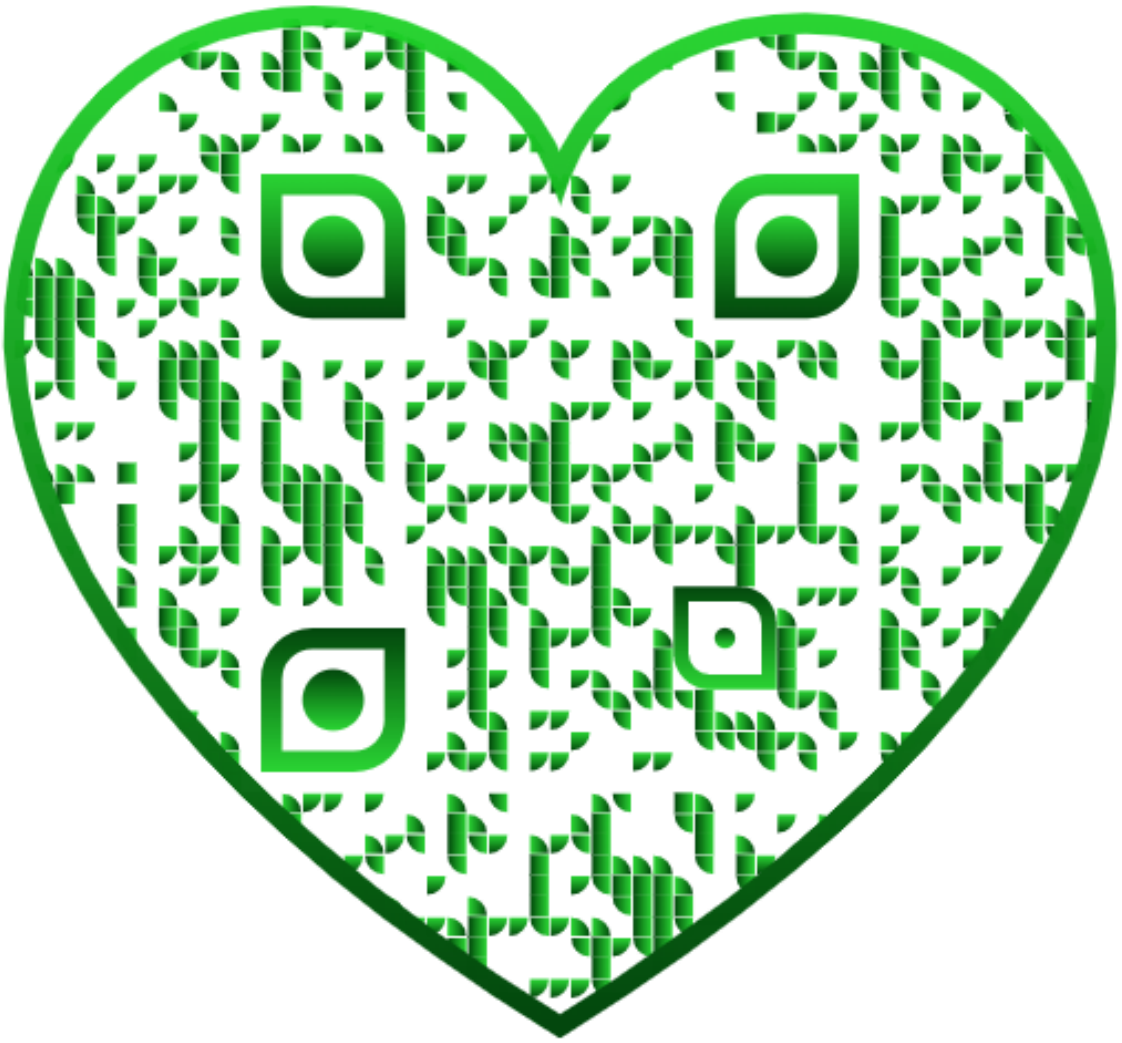
Beyond the I-IV-V

HOW Duke Robillard MAKES 12-Bar Blues Jump & Swing

A master of many blues styles, Duke Robillard garners particular acclaim for his jump and swing playing. When he recently performed at a San Francisco music festival, *GP* seized the opportunity to take a lesson in uptown blues. Robillard's music is full of jazzy turnarounds and sneaky substitutions, so we asked him to explain how he transforms a typical I-IV-V, 12-bar progression into something with more harmonic pizzazz.

By Andy Ellis



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Swinging the Blues

"I've been enamored with blues since I was a kid," Robillard explains, "and I've always looked for different ways to express it with sophistication. I started playing jump blues in '69 or '70. I was introduced to it through early B.B. King records. From there, I went back and studied the swing masters, particularly Count Basie. Swing is one of the timeless sounds in American music. The guitarists who turned me on the most—such as Charlie Christian and Barney Kessel—knew how to take basic blues changes and give them a twist. I'll show you what I mean. Let's work through the harmony for 'Easin' In'—a tune from *Conversations in Swing Guitar*, my new album with Herb Ellis. This medium-tempo blues illustrates the kind of harmony that inspired me to explore swing guitar 30 years ago. We're in the key of *C* [*comps* **Ex. 1**]. These chords sound best played on an archtop—if you can locate one, you'll be amazed."

Notice how Robillard begins with three-note dominant-7th voicings (bars 1, 2, and 3). "When playing swing rhythm," he elaborates, "it's good to use small chords. The sound gets cluttered and muddy if you include too many notes."

Let's take a closer look. Bar 1's *C7*—the I7—consists of the root, ♭7, and 3. Containing the 5, 3, and ♭7, the *F7* (IV7) in bar 2 is rootless. Both chords share a common bass note (*C*) and the top two voices only shift down by a fret when you move from *C7* to *F7*.

"I like to voice chords so when they change, they don't change *much*," Robillard allows. "That sound has always thrilled me—it's a horn section thing. On old records, the harmony changes using very few notes. There's a real beauty to that."

As you shift from *C13* to *C7♯5* to *F9* in bars 4 and 5, listen for the chromatic line (*A*, *G♯*, *G♮*) in the top voice. "I go for as many chromatic parts as possible," enthuses Robillard. "It's not really blues, but Les Paul did it, and it always sounded great to me." Try inserting this I7-IV7 move into your favorite uptown blues songs—"Stormy Monday" is a good candidate.

Economy of Motion

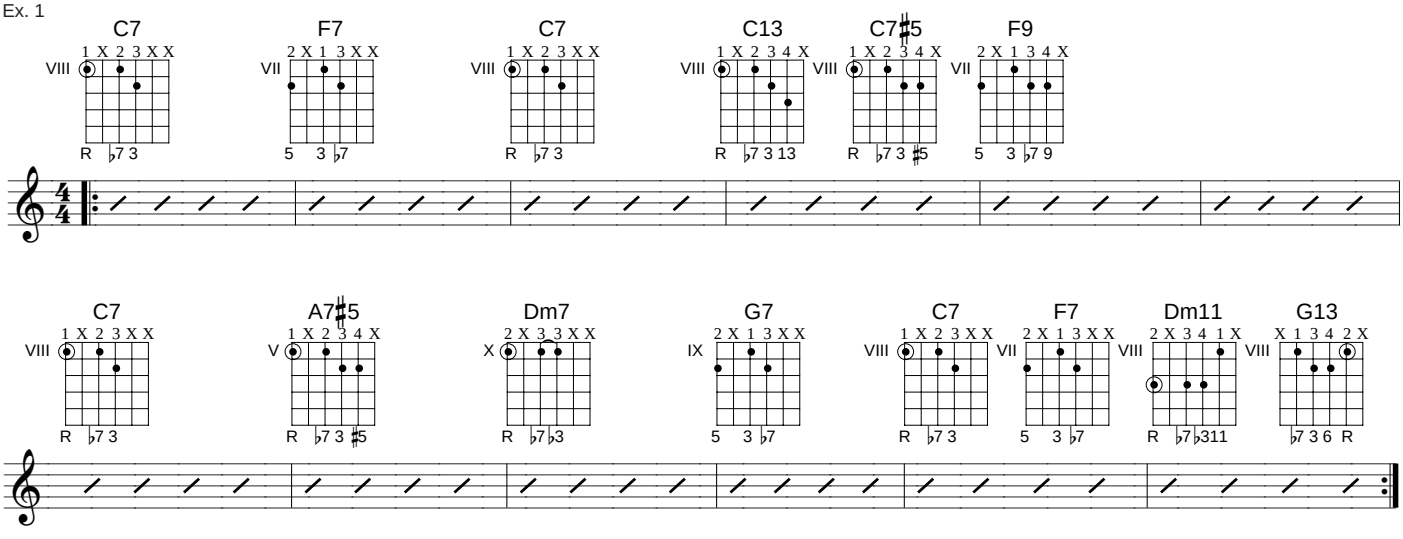
Bars 7-11 feature a classic I7-VI7-IIm7-V7-I7 cadence. Again, listen to the top voice as you move through *C7*, *A7♯5*, *Dm7*, *G7*, and *C7*. Don't let the fretboard action fool you. Despite the physical shifts—which span the fifth to tenth positions—this line is *E*, *F*, *F*, *F*, *E*. That's only two notes for five chords! The three *F*s in the middle illustrate another important swing-rhythm concept: Whenever possible, emphasize common tones in your voicings.

Now listen to the second voice from the top, which goes *B♭*, *C♯*, *C♮*, *B♮*, *B♭*. After the initial minor-third jump, the line descends chromatically below the common tones. Slick.

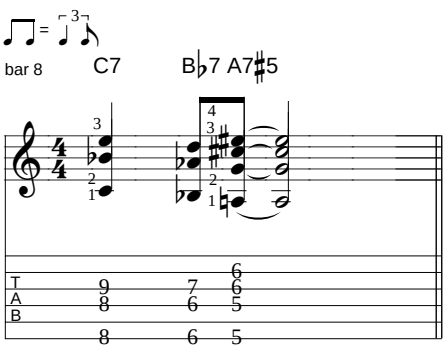
Borrowing from Horns & Keys

"If I were playing this part on an acoustic archtop," Robillard continues, "I might work

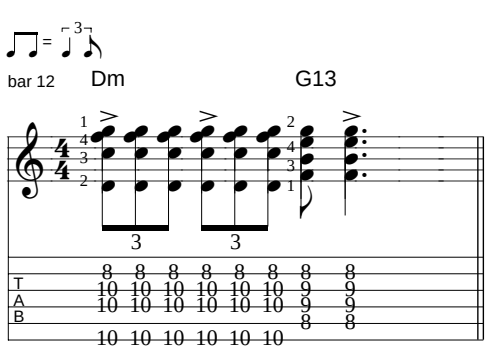
Ex. 1



Ex. 2



Ex. 3



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down to the *A7♯5* by way of *B♭7* [*plays* **Ex. 2**]." In this instance, our ears are tricked into hearing two melody lines: *E, D, E♯*, and *E, D, C♯*. This happens because our first two chords (*C7* and *B♭7*) are three-note voicings, yet the destination chord comprises four notes. Essentially, the melody forks—simultaneously ascending and descending into *A7♯5*. To hear Ex. 2 in the context of our 12-bar progression, replace bar 8 with this three-chord variation.

The phrase's syncopation—hitting *A7♯5* on the *and* of beat two—is important. "The idea is to sound like a horn section," says Robillard. "In fact, throughout this progression, I'm really taking ideas from horn players and keyboardists."

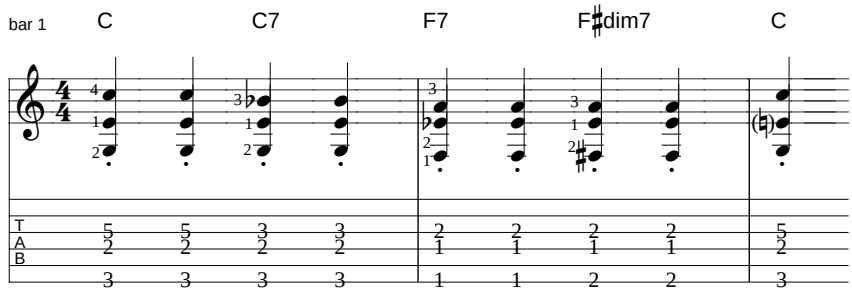
To prove his point, Robillard plays **Ex. 3**. "Here's the turnaround," he states. Once again, the highest voices in this *Dm11-G13* passage are models of musical economy. A common-tone line is on top; the second and third voices merely move a half-step. Watch the accents.

Swing Strumming

Robillard has other voicing tricks up his sleeve. "You could start the progression like this," he says, playing **Ex. 4**. "This is Freddie Green territory."

Green, the great acoustic rhythm guitarist in Count Basie's big band, was well known for his chunky three-note chords—which he voiced

Ex. 4



The Duke's Archtop Secrets

"Ever since I discovered Freddie Green," says Duke Robillard, "I've been intrigued by rhythm guitar played on an acoustic archtop. To my ears, that sound is the essence of swing. Some people consider acoustic rhythm unimportant, because the rhythm is in the background on classic big-band records. But if you have an ear for it, you realize an acoustic archtop adds so much class. It's like a harmonized hi-hat that connects the bassist with the drummer's cymbals."

On recording. "Here's how to capture an archtop's natural sound: Position a small-diaphragm condenser mic one to two feet from the guitar, and aim the capsule directly at the center of the bridge. That's where you get *real* archtop tone. I use Audio-Technica and Neumann mics, but any top-brand condenser will do the trick."

On strings and picks. "I string my acoustic archtops with D'Addario bronze roundwounds—a .013 or .012 set, depending on the guitar. I use the heaviest gauge strings possible, and I raise the action for chording. Like a violin, an archtop opens up sonically the higher the strings are from the soundboard. You also get less buzz. Freddie Green's action was super high. When I'd watch him play, I'd think, 'He presses those strings down so far. How can that guitar possibly be in tune?' He must have had a way of compensating the bridge to accommodate that action.

"Picks matter when you get fussy about sound. Usually for jazz or swing, the thicker the pick, the more timbral depth you get. I usually use a heavy pick, but sometimes I experiment, and it makes a difference in the studio. To get a smoother sound, I might use an extra-heavy pick or a Dunlop Tortex.

On his favorite instruments. "On *Conversations in Swing Guitar*, I used several archtops, including a 1990 Gibson L-5—an unbelievable guitar—and an Epiphone Joe Pass model. Also, I recently produced *Still Jumpin' the Blues* by the legendary singer Jay McShann, and I played a 1946 Epiphone Broadway on every track. That guitar is the real thing."

PHOTO: RANDI ANGLIN

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primarily on the lower strings. To emulate Green's punchy sound, use quick downstrokes across all six strings. Mute the fifth, second, and first strings with the sides of your fretting-hand fingers, and fret each chord with a staccato squeeze. "The secret is to snap each strum from your wrist," says Robillard. "The chords should sound crisp and percussive."

A Deceptive IIm-V

Ex. 5 shows how Robillard will sometimes approach the IV7 with its own IIm7-V7 cadence. "This creates a little extra drive just where you need it," he asserts. The move is simple and effective, and you can use it in virtually any blues context—as well as in any key. Here's the three-step process:

1) Identify the root of bar 5's IV7 chord.

2) Treat this note as a momentary tonic (or I).

3) In bar 4, play the IIm7-V7 change that resolves to the momentary tonic. Each chord gets two beats.

Let's apply this technique to "Easin' In." Bar 5's IV is *F9* or *F7*, thus our momentary tonic is *F*. In the key of *F*, the IIm7-V7 is *Gm7-C7*, so play these two chords in bar 4. Once you hit bar 5, it's business as usual.

(For an in-depth explanation of this deceptive cadence—and to track it on the circle of fourths and fifths—see our Aug. '99 Back Track, "Jazzin' the Blues.")

A Tricky Turnaround

Ex. 6 is an ultra-cool *C7-A7♯5-D9-G7♯5* turnaround that you can drop into bars 11 and 12 of Ex. 1. "This is another I-VI-II-V progression, similar to the one in bars 7-10," details Robillard, "only this time, the II chord is dominant, rather than minor."

Chromatic lines? We've got one in the top voice: *E-E♯-E-D♯-E*. The alto—or second highest—voice contains chromatics as well. Check it out: From *C♯*, the line descends in half-steps. Strum these chords briskly using the wrist-generated snap Robillard described earlier. Now slip this turnaround into the last two bars of one of your favorite blues tunes.

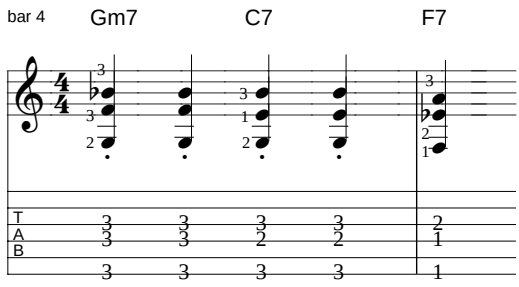
Half-Whole Lines

As we've seen, you can rearrange the chord progression in several ways, and still stay within the prescribed, 12-bar blues format. While you can solo over these various changes using the time-honored *C* blues scale, Robillard has two melodic secrets that will add swing credibility to your improvised lines.

"If I'm playing a solo and going to the IV, I might do a riff like this," says Robillard, playing **Ex. 7a**. "Basically I'm playing from the ♯I—*C♯7*—for a second." It's helpful to analyze Robillard's line in the context of a *C* half-whole scale. As its name implies, this eight-note scale consists of alternating half- and whole-steps. In *C*, that's *C*, *D♭*, *E♭*, *E♮*, *G♭*, *G♮*, *A*, *B♭*, and *C*. Start Ex. 7a at beat three of bar 4, and prepare to smile. Play the line with a swing feel.

Ex. 7b is another *C* half-whole scale run that leads to *F9*. Start this one on the downbeat of bar 4, and you'll grease right into *F9*. Pay attention to the hammer-ons, pull-offs, and slides.

Ex. 5



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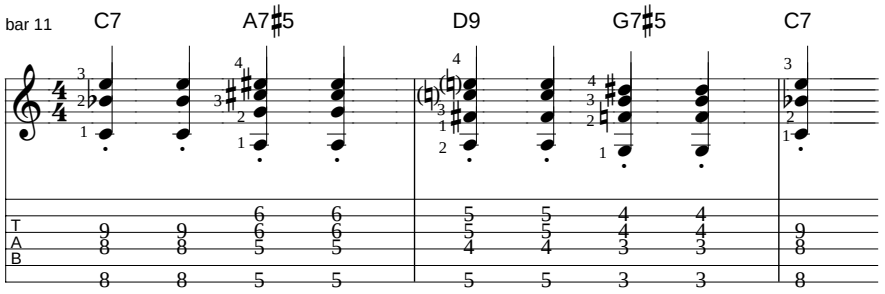
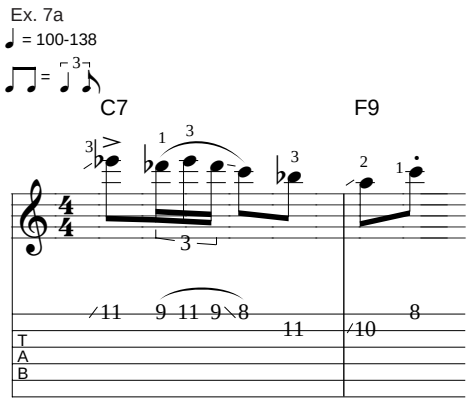
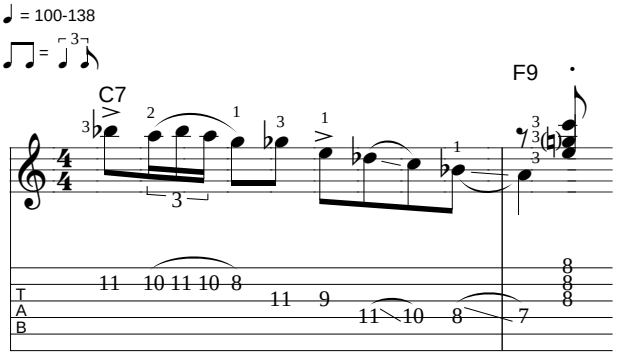
Ex. 6



Ex. 7a



Ex. 7b



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"In swing, you've got to fill up the space with *feeling*, rather than more notes," says Robillard. "Little things like hammer-ons and slides can create that mood."

A Diminished Approach

"A lot of players rely on the minor-pentatonic scale for blues," comments Robillard, "but there are more sounds available. For example, when you're playing over the IV chord—in this case, *F9*—you can slip in a bar of *F♯dim7* before heading back to *C7* [*plays* ***Ex. 8a***]." Arpeggiating the ♯IVdim7 is nifty way to create tension that's released at the I7. The double-stops in bar 2 are especially noteworthy. "Barney Kessel and Buddy Guy play them all the time," explains Robillard. "I use my flatpick and middle finger on these. Just keep that top *C* constant."

Ex. 8b is another variation on the ♯IVdim7-I7 theme. "This sound is part of swing blues," says Robillard, "and it's important to absorb it." Dig the double-stops in beat four, bar 1. This is classic Kenny Burrell—the stuff of moody, beatnik blues. Use this lick to end a blues in *C*, and watch your bandmates' reactions.

Getting an Earful

"The way to learn this stuff," says Robillard, "is to listen to swing music until it becomes ingrained in your head. Listen to Count Basie. He taught me more than anybody about the beauty of adding passing chords in blues. This feel comes from the '20s and early '30s, when people played blues melodically. I got a lot of my lines directly from Louis Armstrong—his phrasing is so incredible. Also [saxophonists] Ben Webster, Lester Young, and Johnny Hodges—they all came out of big bands and played with so much melodic invention, yet so much blues feeling. That's what hooked me. It's great American music that will still sound amazing 100 years from now."

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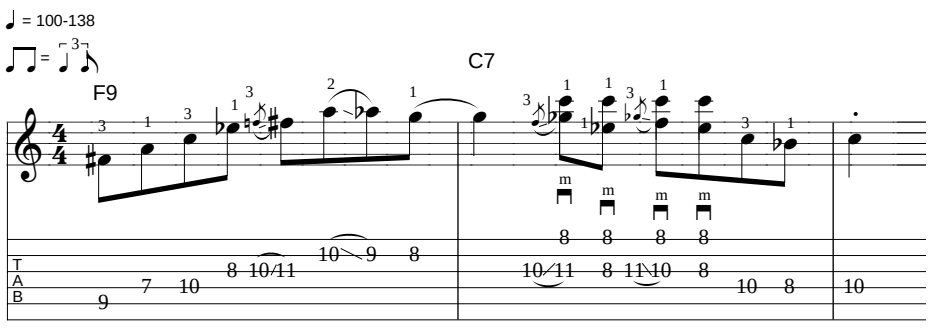
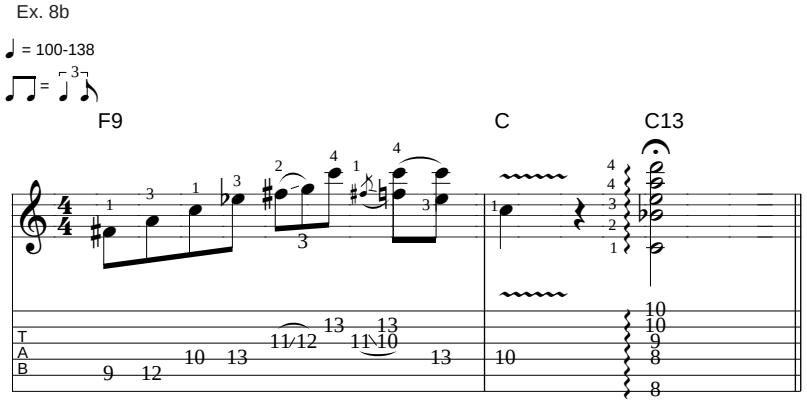
Ex. 8a



Ex. 8b